19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

CHAPTER IV

MENTAL AND MORAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE KAREN

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The Karen draws the blinds over the windows of his heart and leaves one to wonder what goes on within. I once asked an educated Karen what he thought was the chief characteristic of his race, and he immediately replied that they are a people who can be afraid. Centuries of subjugation and oppression have filled them with fear. During the protracted period of their tribulations, to be caught by a Burman was to be stripped of everything, even of one's clothing, and to be beaten into the bargain. Where only a few families lived on the plains, the women with child dared not undergo confinement in their houses, lest they could not escape from a sudden attack by their oppressors. Karen cartmen still drive around a village rather than through it, although they know there is little danger of having dogs set on them, as there used to be. Not only does the Karen fear his fellow-men, but he is also terrified by the strange and weird beings, demons and ghosts, with which his imagination and credulity people the world. Should he, even by chance, offend any of these—and it is easily done he thinks—he must live in dread of their vengeance. His religion is one of fear, precaution, and propitiatory sacrifice. The trepidations of the past have been perpetuated through generations and, though education has stifled them in a measure, they still crop out on occasion even in the most advanced members of the race.

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The Karen is led into all sorts of difficulties by his timidity. He is apprehensive and desirous of avoiding trouble with officers or others. When brought into court to answer questions, often this fear will lead him to deny any knowledge of the facts, instead of relating what he has seen; or he may acknowledge the opposite of what he wants to prove. Not long ago I heard of a man who had what seemed to be a good case, but on the witness-stand he swore to the opposite of what he had told previously. When asked why he did so, he replied that he was so scared that he did not know what he was saying. In thus yielding to his timidity the Karen often in-

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

626
156
609

volves himself in serious difficulty, for his mistakes are easily detected.

Shyness, caution, and concealment are fruits of this trait of fear. I have often heard a veteran school-teacher remark that the Karen never puts his best foot foremost. In the past it was not safe for him to do so. Concealment was one of his natural means of protection. To show signs of prosperity or admit having possessions was only tempting his more powerful neighbors to come and dispossess him. I know of recent instances of persecution of one sort or another being visited upon certain Karen villages on account of their prosperous condition. In the days of the Ancient Regime the French peasantry simulated poverty, in order to protect their property from the tax-collector. The Karen has been preyed upon in various ways in earlier and later times, and in his fear and helplessness he has resorted to the method of the European peasant. Shyness and caution are marked traits of the Karen women even more than of the men. Indeed, I have seen all the inhabitants of a village run to the jungle when I came in sight. A group of girls out gathering firewood dropped their faggots and disappeared as fast as possible at the approach of my party along the path. In their attempts to hide their shyness, schoolgirls often succeed in attracting the attention they are trying to avoid.

A leading authority on Burma has said that the Karen are "absolutely devoid of humor." [1] Having had years of experience as a missionary among these people, I may be allowed to differ from the opinion just quoted. The authority referred to was a high Government official, and I am quite sure that no Karen would be so self-forgetful as to risk offending the dignity of such a personage. One who has entered into intimate association with these people, has been entertained in their houses, and has sat beside their fireplaces will testify to their love of fun and their jolly laughter. For myself I ask for no lighter-hearted companions than those with whom I have traveled over the plains and hills, and whom I have met in distant villages. They are keen enough to see the humor in some of their folklore tales, in embarrassing situations, and in the little mishaps of daily life, and to laugh heartily when these are told. They are also capable of enjoying practical jokes. This is illustrated by the instance of a young man who by mistake shot a vulture, as it flew up out of the bushes, and decided to serve the

522

[1] Sir J. G. Scott, *Burma, A Handbook*, p. 129.

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

of color and design is practically limited to the woven patterns of some of their garments. They have only a scant vocabulary for colors. I have seldom heard them remark on the beauty of a sunset or the glories of a sunrise. Sometimes they have called attention to a pleasing landscape, but I have wondered whether they were not doing so because they knew of my pleasure in such scenes.

The Karen is a plebeian. His manners at home are crude, although he is not without a certain personal dignity. His shyness in the presence of strangers, especially of those whom he fears, causes him embarrassment. Under such circumstances he often impresses one as being impolite. He is not servile. It has never been his custom to "shiko".[3] The greatest chief is a comrade among his men, who do not yield their self-respect in his presence. Nevertheless, the inherent timidity of the race shows itself in the avoidance of making a request in person. A request may expose the one making it to the chagrin of a refusal and the one addressed to the unpleasant necessity of giving an adverse answer. The Karen, therefore, gets a friend to act as his intermediary. Even a boy who wants to buy a book will have his classmate get it for him.

Amiability is another marked trait of the Karen, both of the educated and the uneducated, rendering them acceptable in many kinds of service. Young Karen women are in demand as nursemaids all over Burma, and not a few have gone temporarily to England and America in that capacity. They are kind, patient, and faithful in their care of the children entrusted to their care.

The remarkable chastity of the Karen is also worthy of notice. It has, however, been mentioned in several places in this work and perhaps need not be discussed further in this connection, except to say that the fear of the evil consequences of violating the laws of the elders has kept them free from many unhealthy customs that are found in many parts of the world.[4]

[3] "Shiko" is a Burmese word signifying the act of worship, or of showing respect to officials.

[4] See pages 139, 142, 192, 288.

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

supply themselves with pieces of plantain leaf and in turn help themselves from each of the three leaves while praying: "O Lord of the great spirits, do thou, who carest for us, prevent all sickness and sorrow from approaching us. May we be protected from injury by sharp sticks of bamboo and wood, by the arrows and spears of our enemies, and from all evil that may befall us. Wilt thou be our shield and defense." Through a small bamboo tube the grandmother-priestess drinks a little liquor from the pot, as do her relatives in their turn. She then points a newly sprouted plantain leaf at the skull of the pig, which has been hung up over her mat, and repeats the last prayer. Then all drink a little more of the liquor and are ready to follow the example of the priestess in partaking of the feast.

The earthen pot, in which the pork has been cooked, is intended to remind the kindred that they are children of the earth; while the bamboo joints, in which some of the offerings have been prepared, serve to keep before their minds the temporary character of their bamboo houses and utensils.

Customs Incidental to the "Bgha" Feasts

Certain customs and tabus incidental to the "Bgha" feasts should be noted. Unless all the members of the family are present at such a ceremony, except those excluded from the feast, the offerings are thought to be objectionable to the "Bgha." If a person absents himself from a feast that is being held to promote the recovery of a sick relative, he is suspected of desiring the continued illness or the death of the sick one. Or his absence may be interpreted as an effort to bring calamity upon some member of the family. Such charges are made against the member of a family who becomes a Christian and remains away from the ceremony. The others allege that he no longer retains his affection for his kindred and is willing to bring illness and disaster upon them by his absence, which angers the "Bgha."

While the feasts are in progress, no stranger is permitted to enter the family-room. When I first traveled in the hills, I noticed that as I passed through the corridor of a village-house some member of a family stood in the doorway of one or another of the family-rooms to prevent my entering. This seemed strange, in view of the fact that I was usually received with cordial hospitality. On inquiry I found that the guarding of the door was to keep me from

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

unwittingly rendering their offerings futile. The advantage of the village guest-room then became clear to me. There I and other strangers could be entertained, and there the men who were ineligible to attend the feast of the family they had married into could congregate and visit, while their relatives were participating in the "Bgha" ceremony.

The idea of sacrifice is undoubtedly at the root of the "Bgha" feasts. According to the explanation of an old Karen woman, when one has offended the family spirit or, as the people say, has "hit the 'Bgha'" ("pgha ba Bgha"), one has fallen on the worst possible fate; for the demon will seek to devour the life principle ("k' la") of the unfortunate one, unless propitiated by offerings of chicken and pork. The "Bgha" is supposed to be satisfied with the "k' la" of these sacrifices, which constitute the best eating within the knowledge of the Karen people. Even those who no longer fear their "Bgha" will call in the members of their family and make a feast, principally on account of their own enjoyment of it. In such cases they add the spices for a curry, instead of cooking the meat with only salt and chili. The Karen, especially those of Shwegyin, declare that fornication, adultery, and incest anger the family spirits more than any other offenses. Such acts of immorality incite the "Bgha" to curse the soil, blight the crops, and send epidemics among the people. Once aroused, a "Bgha" will assume the form of a tiger or snake and wait for its victims, in order to destroy the "k'las" of the offenders and other inhabitants of their village. In case of a poor season and bad crops the elders become suspicious and sometimes succeed in scaring young persons into a confession of their secret sins. Unusual offerings are required to appease the offended demon, these being—according to one list in my possession—first, a buffalo, next, an ox, and finally, a chicken and a pig. All the family must unite in an earnest prayer that these offerings may prove acceptable to the "Bgha" and avert any further calamities from them. The great fear of blighted crops, and of other evils not less feared because unknown, tends to keep the Karen a chaste people, which they certainly are for the most part.[1]

The traditional explanation of the use of the chicken bones and the pig's gall-bladder in divination, and of pork and fowls in the family feasts, is that the chickens and pigs ate most of the fragments of the God-given book which the white brother delivered to

[1] See pp. 30, 139, 142, 148, 192, 225, 288.

19: Marshall M-S (ca. 1916) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

of child-bearing to other members of the village. MacMahon states that the Bwe husband of a newly delivered mother complies with the custom of cutting fresh bamboo joints, in which he draws and heats the water for bathing the infant, over a fire kindled by himself in the open. He then carries the water to his wife's room up a new ladder, which he has made. After his wife has washed the child or he himself, in case she is too weak to do so, he hangs the bamboo joints under the house and leaves them there for six days before they may be used again.[8] On the day of the birth of a child, or even of a domestic animal, members of the village are forbidden to work. This is the tabu of births ("ta dū ta ble").

In the early times widows and orphans, as well as persons found to be holding improper relations, became tabu and were expelled from the village, in order to keep other inhabitants from falling under the vengeance of the evil-working demon, whose attention might be diverted from his first victims. The driving of these unfortunates into the jungle to live there by themselves, may be described as a kind of primitive quarantine.[9] Precaution of a different kind was at the bottom of the requirement that a visiting stranger should enter and leave the village-house by the same ladder. It was also required that the visitor must descend the ladder while facing inwards. Leaving the house by a different way from that by which one had entered, created suspicion of hostile intent among the inhabitants and might lead to hostilities. Like other neighboring peoples, the Karen observe a tabu in regard to women's garments, which must not come in contact with a man. Garments that are put out to dry must be hung away from the common paths in some inconspicuous place. Probably this custom originated in the fear that the supposed weakness of woman might be communicated to the men. For the same reason, evidently, the Brec tribe prohibits married men from taking part in making the coffin for a woman who has died in child-birth.

Tabus connected with portents, such as eclipses of the moon, earthquakes, the cries of apes, and certain strange sounds in the jungle, have a religious significance for the Karen and are accompanied by the prohibition of work for one or more days. The witnesses of these portents are seized with fear, drop their work, and stand about in helplessness. This, undoubtedly, is the normal behavior of primitive people under such circumstances. They as-

[8] MacMahon, *The Karens of the Golden Chersonese*, p. 222.
[9] See Chapter XIV on Social Conditions, pp. 128, 134.

Karen AP7

177

treated elsewhere in this volume will be briefly discussed in the following paragraphs.

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The cessation of open hostilities between the Karen and the Burmese has largely mitigated the old animosity existing between them. Where members of the two races live in close proximity, however, some friction is still produced. Nevertheless, the Karen's dislike of their neighbors is not so great as to prevent many of those living on the plains from adopting Burmese ways and speech. They do this not out of admiration for things Burmese, but because of the prevalence of Burmese culture and in order to avoid the appearance of rusticity that marks those who fail to conform. Some not only wear the dress of the Burmese and speak their language —always with more or less of an accent—but also, except the Christians, go to the pagodas and participate in Burmese feasts. A number of wealthy Karens, who have moved into the larger Burmese towns along the railway line and live there in Burmese style, have to all appearances lost their racial identity. In many cases those who have copied the manners of their neighbors, experience a decided weakening of their old religious faith and its moral restraints, being led into evil ways by Burmans of the less respectable classes, with whom they fraternize.

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The first experiment of the British in the administration of justice among the Karen, was not successful. It consisted in appointing certain influential Karen chiefs to serve as magistrates for their people. This plan was unsatisfactory because some of the appointees were reluctant to assume authority, and also because the different tribes were much intermingled. It was, therefore, decided to try the cases of Karens, like those of the members of the other races, in the ordinary courts. While this method is correct in principle and an improvement in practice, it has not always been administered by representatives of the English nation or in the spirit of British justice. A closer supervision of the courts is needed to curb the prejudices sometimes manifested by the local magistrates.

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The progress of the Karen in education has been very marked. Their "Lost Book" having been restored to them by their "white brother" in the person of the Christian missionary, they have been most eager to learn to read it. This has been true from the early years of missionary activity. Before the British had established orderly government in Burma, one American missionary had pupils in her school in Moulmein almost every year who came over two